

Changing female employment over time

Released 18/03/2021

Source: [Labour Force, Australia, February 2021](#)

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Women's participation in paid work has increased considerably over the past 50 years. Women made up almost half the paid workforce in Australia in 2020, compared to around 30% in 1966.

In addition to participating in paid work at much greater levels than in the past, women are also working longer. This has changed across the generations - particularly at the ages when women usually have children. These changes have occurred in conjunction with changes in employment opportunities, greater access to paid parental leave, access to more flexible working arrangements and changes in the structure of the economy. In comparison, male employment across time, and across the generations, has seen much smaller changes.

This article compares female employment, by age, at various points since 1966, then provides a 'cohort' analysis which compares female employment and full-time employment, by age, across the generations.

Female employment over time

Chart 1 shows the employment-to-population ratio of women in 1966, 1980, 2000 and 2020. The employment-to-population ratio, which is the number of employed women as a proportion of all women, is used as it controls for increases in the population over time and

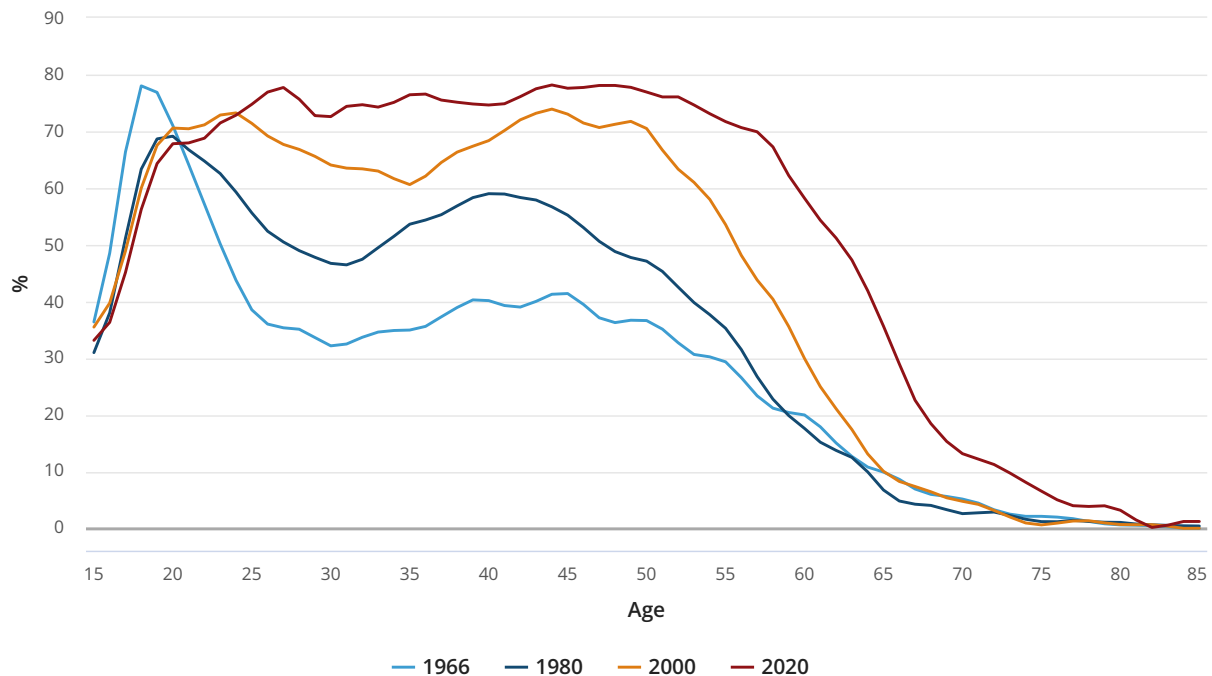
thus is more comparable over longer periods of time than employment levels.

Through the years, there has tended to be quite high employment for women in their early 20s, with a distinct decrease in employment for women between around 25 and 40. This decrease was earlier, and more pronounced in 1966, but has steadily decreased. In 2020, there was only a slight dip in female employment at around 30 years of age.

The age at which women's employment was lowest has increased from 30 in 1966 (32.2%), to 31 in 1980 (46.4%) and 35 in 2000 (60.6%). Interestingly, the age at which women's employment was lowest in 2020 was 30 - the same as in 1966. However, this is associated with an employment-to-population ratio that is more than twice as high as in 1966, and only a slight decline from earlier ages.

In 2020, women were also more likely to continue to work as they got older compared with earlier years. For example, the employment-to-population ratio for 65 year old women in 2020 (35.6%) was more than 3 times higher than similar aged women in previous years (less than 7% in 1980, and around 10% in 1966 and 2000). Note that the age structure of employment in 2020 was broadly similar to 2019.

Chart 1: Employment-to-Population ratio, Females, Original



Note: Estimates are as at November of each year. Series are smoothed using the 7-term Henderson moving average weights.

Source: Labour Force Survey

Female employment across the generations

Another way to look at changes in female employment over time is to look at the experiences of women across the different generations. This provides a different perspective to looking at female employment at various points in time.

Chart 2 compares the employment-to-population ratio of women, by age, across the generations (based on their year of birth). For this article, the following common generations and years of birth have been used:

- 'Greatest generation' - born between 1901 and 1924
- 'Silent generation' - born between 1925 and 1945

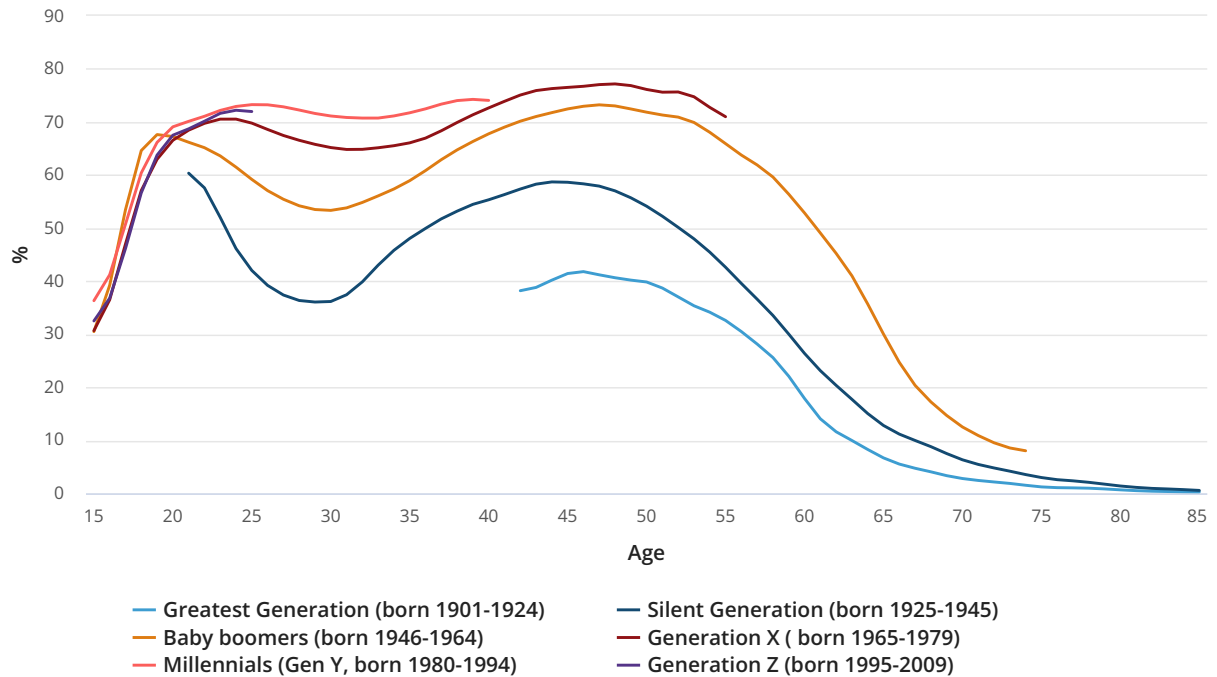
- 'Baby boomers' - born between 1946 and 1964
- 'Generation X' - born between 1965 and 1979
- 'Millennials' (Gen-Y) - born between 1980 and 1994
- 'Generation Z' - born between 1995 and 2009

Women in later generations had higher levels of employment than women of similar ages from earlier generations. For example, 45 year old women from the 'Greatest generation' had an employment-to-population ratio of 41.4% compared to 58.6% for women from the 'Silent generation'.

A prominent feature in each generation is the dip in overall employment for women aged around 30 years, which coincides with the time women are most often raising children. Unlike the previous point in time comparisons however, which showed a progressive increasing of the age at which employment was lowest, the age at which employment is lowest for women is more similar across the generations - between 29 and 32 for each generation.

Women in the more recent generations tend to work for longer in their lifetime, with employment highest in the late 40s for both 'Baby boomers' and 'Generation X'.

Chart 2: Employment-to-Population ratio, Females, Original

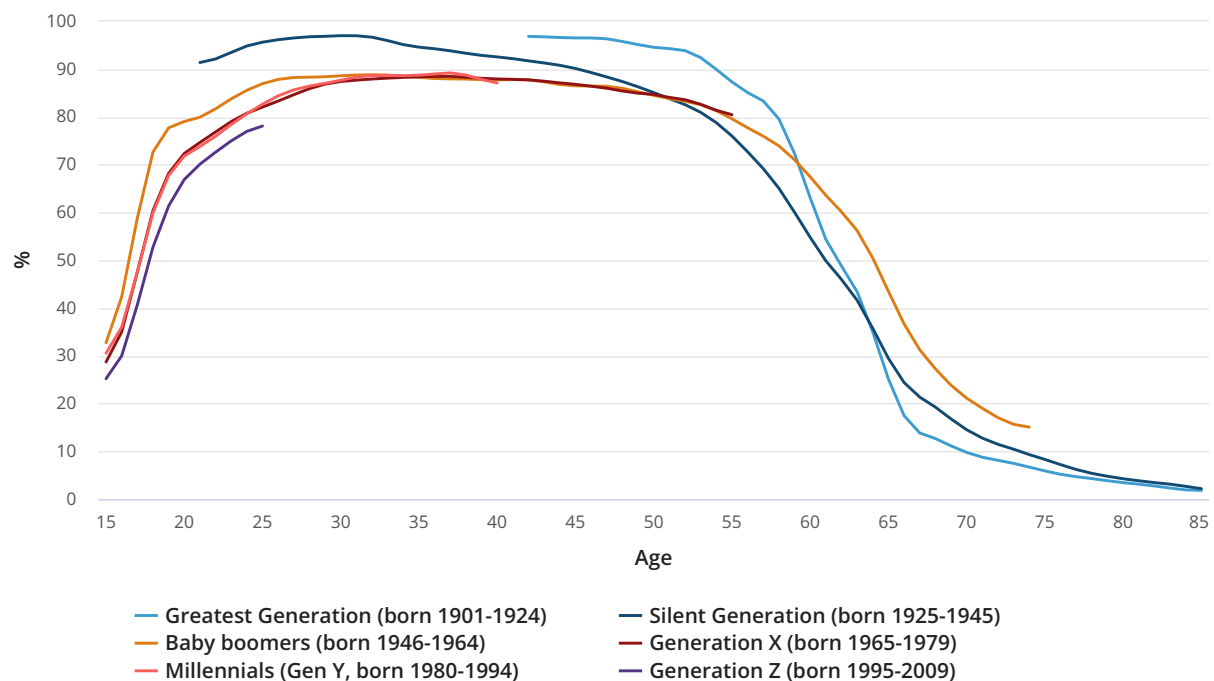


Note: Series are smoothed using the 7-term Henderson moving average weights.

Source: Labour Force Survey

Male employment across the generations

Chart 2a: Employment-to-population ratio, Males, Original



Note: Series are smoothed using the 7-term Henderson moving average weights.

Source: Labour Force Survey

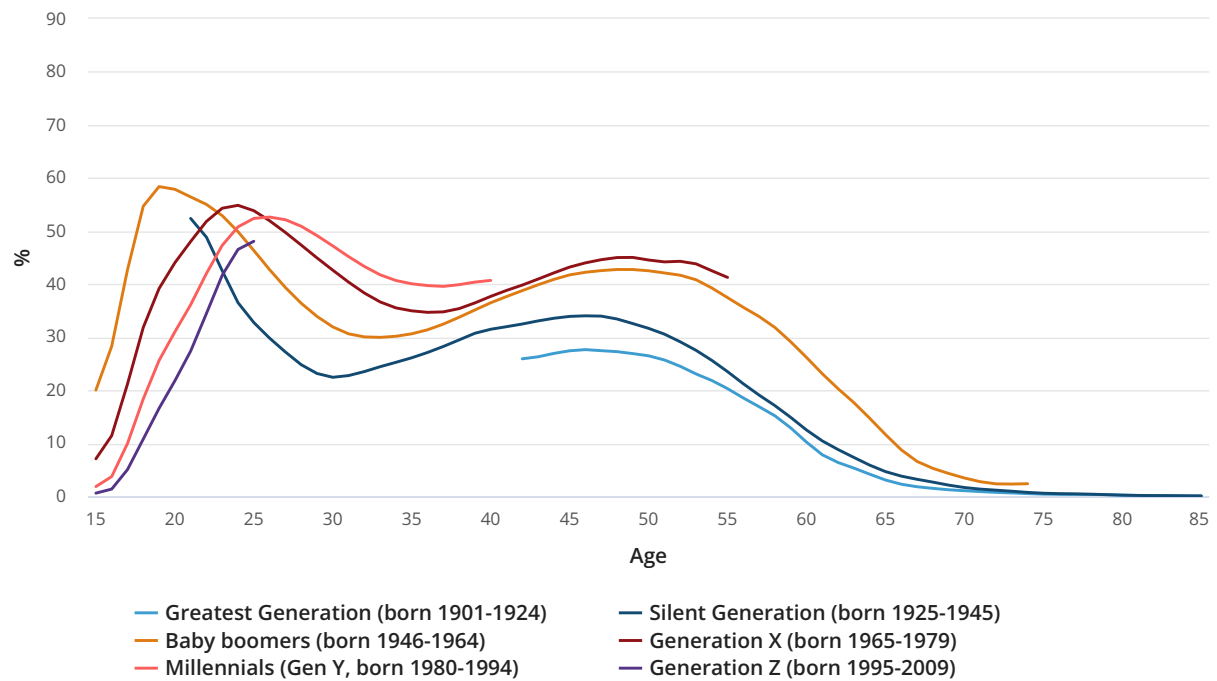
Full-time employment across the generations

Chart 3 shows the full-time employment-to-population ratio for women, by age, across the generations.

It shows that full-time employment for young women entering the workforce has changed across the generations. This is in contrast to overall employment which was similar for young women across the generations, highlighting the increasing prevalence of part-time work.

It also shows that, while employment for Baby boomer and Generation X women was highest in their 40s, full-time employment did not return to the highs of their early 20s.

Chart 3: Full-time Employment-to-Population ratio, Females, Original



Note: Series are smoothed using the 7-term Henderson moving average weights.

Source: Labour Force Survey

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